

We use the term “system” loosely, as we believe one reason for an overall lack of quality in child care is that there is no single child care system, but rather, different levels of networks that are not connected. We do not advocate that all programs be lodged under a single form of sponsorship (such as Head Start or the schools). Rather, we advocate that service providers be part of a coordinated system that reduces inefficiencies and redundancy, and that services be linked in ways that make sense to families and professionals in the field.

To improve the quality of the child care system, attention must be paid to the child care infrastructure. In particular, we suggest (a) improving the regulatory system in states by strengthening standards as described above as well as strengthening enforcement of the standards, (b) expanding the use of program accreditation as a means of supporting quality, and (c) providing for state level planning to facilitate collaboration across the various components of the system. We offer three strategies for improving the infrastructure of child care.

First, states should focus on improving licensing standards as a means of raising quality, and should ensure that funds are invested to adequately enforce the standards. As indicated in the first phase of this study, improvement in the regulation of child care can have a positive impact on quality. The relationship is simple: states that have more stringent licensing standards have fewer low quality child care centers. Child care policies that keep regulations at a minimum and exempt categories of providers from regulation help expand supply at the expense of quality. In addition, policies that allow the use of child care subsidies in exempt or otherwise unregulated settings also impede the promotion of high quality child care.

Second, efforts should be directed toward encouraging national accreditation as a means of improving the quality of child care. In the first phase of our study, we found that accredited centers, those that voluntarily met higher program standards that were specified by an outside organization, provided higher quality services than nonaccredited centers. Accreditation can be expanded by providing fiscal incentives such as higher reimbursement rates for accredited programs. In addition, training and technical assistance initiatives designed specifically to help programs that are working toward accreditation have been shown to be effective.

Third, recent comprehensive attempts by states to provide preschool care and education experiences for children are well founded and should be greatly expanded. The results of this study support policies focusing on early childhood care and education as a means of improving children’s chances of being ready for school. Our findings from the first phase suggested that centers with public funds provided higher quality care. A number of different state initiatives are underway which offer guidance about how to effectively use these public resources to raise the quality of services provided. The best of these efforts try to bring together some or all of the disparate segments of early childhood services (child care centers and homes, Head Start, early intervention, family support services, and the schools).

In closing we must be reminded of two important issues. Providing quality early childhood programs is not only about better cognitive and social outcomes for young children, but also about providing opportunities for a good life for them while they are in the child care setting. Our findings in phase one indicated that children actually liked the programs that were rated higher in quality better than those rated lower. So the programs that we have defined as higher in quality are seen by the children themselves as preferable. It is too easy to leave their concerns for a good life out of our thinking about what is needed. Second, it is important to note that the impact of child care quality on children’s success in the early years of school is modest. While child care experiences are important, they are not the only determining factor in children’s success. We should not hold hopes that high quality child care will forever erase the major disadvantages some children face as they come to school. The study emphasizes that while we must be realistic in what we promise, we need to promote efforts to improve the quality of early care and education experiences to enable all children to be ready to learn and succeed in school. ■